Fire Is Not the Tr

By LCdr. Dave Lobdell

Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton

The flight was briefed as an SFWT BFM warm-up off the boat during a good-deal, one-hour cycle—a snapshot drill, a defensive, an offensive, and a high-aspect set. The weather was great; unfortunately, I was fighting one of the more skilled JOs. I'd have to work a little harder.

Launch, rendezvous and tac admin were completed. During level-off checks, fuel transfer was normal, and all switches checked good, although the right side appeared to be transferring faster than the left side. We went into the snapshot drill and set up for the defensive engagement; now was the time to teach the youngsters something about fighting the Tomcat. We set up for the perch engagement, and I reversed my turn as the defensive fighter, the ranges were counted down, and then came the "Fight's on" call.

Coming out of burner, I shot chaff and flares, and went into a hard-break turn. As the JO went nose high, I unloaded, rolled into the ditch, and re-staged afterburner. Pulling through 60-degrees nose low, I heard a "Knock it off" call. "Wow," I thought, "That ditch really must have watered his eyes, or he is having some aircraft problems and doesn't want to be humiliated by the role reversal I was about to administer."

Then came the call, "You're on fire, check your dumps off." I leveled my wings, pulled to the horizon, and pulled both throttles to idle. I confirmed the dump switch was off and then

aining Objective

secured the fuel-transfer switch, thinking it was simply venting fuel lit off by the afterburner. My wingman confirmed fuel was coming from the vent mast or the dump. I looked in the mirrors and saw a large fire near my tail on the left side; this day was not going well.

My wingman said it looked like it was coming from the left motor. I went through the boldface—throttle idle, airsource off. Then the fire light illuminated. The left throttle was secured, and the left fuel-shutoff handle was pulled. As we were climbing and decelerating, the fire light went out after 15 seconds. I checked the fire-detection system, and it checked good. The fire appeared to be out.

We turned toward and contacted the ship, told them of our situation, and requested the dreaded emergency pull forward. After 2,000 hours in the F-14, I prided myself on knowing the PCL cold and went through most of the checks before DCAG (my RIO) broke out the checklist, but this is where DCAG's 40 Tomcat-hours paid off. He went through every checklist in painful detail as if we were on a RAG simulator event, and he actually caught me on a couple of steps I did out of order but was able to fix.

Our wingman said the fire appeared to be smoldering at the base of the left-vertical stab. We still were flying, and I was busy dumping down and trying to negotiate with CATCC for ACLS on the straight-in.

While dumping down, I tried to balance the fuel tapes and to get the fuel on the left side over to the right side so I could use it. But, of course, max-trap weight was reached with 5,000 pounds on the left side and 2,000 on the right side. In the meantime, with the ship fighting me one circle, I gave up on the ACLS. I then set up on a two-mile arc, waiting for the ship to stop turning, when our wingman reported the fire definitely was out.

Switching up tower, we checked in and DCAG gave paddles our approach speed, which I had calculated off the top of my head. Paddles disagreed (because I was wrong), and DCAG found the correct approach speed for our single-engine configuration. I just kept my turn in and flew the slightly fast approach. At three-quarters of a mile, we called the ball, and at one-half a mile, paddles called for the boat to stop turning; they would take the wind as is.

I kept in my angle of bank, flew slightly fast, and listened intently for paddles. At the call, "You're overpowered," I flew the best 1-wire of my life, went to full burner at touchdown, and set the hook as only a Tomcat can do.

Then came the call, "You're on fire, check your dumps off."

Our post-flight inspection showed extensive fire damage to the left rudder and rudder actuator, and significant charring and damage to the base of the left vertical stabilizer. After the maintenance investigation, no cause for the fire ever was determined. Maintainers ran the engines on the test stand. They checked the hydraulic system, fuel system, and the fuel cells. But nothing significant was found. Only two small leaks were found, but nothing that could have caused the volume and size of fire encountered in flight. The jet was repaired and has flown numerous sorties with no problems.

As with any close call, it was disturbing that we found no clear cause of the fire.

LCdr. Lobdell flew with VF-41.